

Dear LUTSF

AIKIDO / SWORD COURSE SHISEIKAN DOJO TOKYO JAPAN
22nd October-2nd November 2007

The purpose of the visit to Japan was to enhance my studies as both dance practitioner and martial artist. I have studied Aikido concurrently with contemporary dance for over twenty years. I have found Aikido to be an invaluable resource for enhancing my work both as a performer and teacher. This trip enabled me a rare opportunity to study without the usual interruptions of every day life, to take a moment to pause and reflect on my practise.

To have the opportunity to visit the Shiseikan dojo itself was of enormous benefit. To be taught by so many knowledgeable people in one place and in a centre that has such a clear ethos was inspiring. The beauty and atmosphere of the centre created the perfect environment for study and self reflection. By being in Japan it was possible to experience the country's culture, both historically and presently and how this reflects on the practise of martial arts, religion and society.

Having taught dance classes in various situations since returning from Japan, I feel a renewed sense of clarity about what I am trying to divulge to my students, I also believe that through my experiences there, I have been given many tools with which to continue my own study. I have reached a juncture in my life where it is necessary to reassess my working practise. I have recently stopped working with the dance company I have been performing with for the past nine years. It is both daunting and exciting to be venturing into new waters. This recent visit to The Shiseikan has helped me to consider this time of change not as an end but as a positive opportunity for new experiences.

I would very much like to thank the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for assisting my trip to Japan.

Yours sincerely

Sasha Roubicek

LISA ULLMAN TRAVEL SCHOLARSHIP FUND REPORT
Sasha Roubicek Aikido course Tokyo, October 2007

During my time in Tokyo I attended Aikido and sword classes at the Shiseikan dojo. The Shiseikan is set within the grounds of the Meiji Shrine surrounded by Yoyogi park. The park is a large oasis of calm in the centre of Tokyo. The classes were taught by various senior teachers, including Inaba sensei who is head and director of the centre. It was a rare opportunity to receive extraordinary and inspiring tuition which extended beyond the building.

I attended the Shiseikan as a member of Tetsushinkan dojo along with Paul Douglas who is my aikido teacher and fourteen other members from our London based dojo.

To mark the start of our course a special ceremony was given at the Meiji shrine. I was a little anxious on my way to the ceremony, I have practised with Inaba sensei on various European courses but it had been twelve years since I had visited Japan. Walking through the tranquillity of the park and hearing the distinctive sound of the crows that live there, I was reminded of the intense but wonderful experiences I had previously had and my anxiety started to diminish. Endo san who is Inaba sensei's assistant, had very thoughtfully arranged a traditional Japanese dance performance as part of the ceremony. They are not only aware of my connection with dance but also that our dojo is based at *movingeast* directed by Paul. I felt very honoured to witness such an event, set within such a beautiful place. I was aware of my good fortune at being allowed into parts of the shrine not usually open to the public. The ceremony with its elegance, and meditative nature helped set the tone for our course.

Aikido is considered a non-competitive martial art, it is usually practised in pairs with one person acting as the attacker and the other the receiver. Simply put, one aim is to re-use an attackers energy or force, with the intention of disengaging a potentially dangerous situation, where necessary destabilising or immobilising the aggressor without causing serious injury. Inaba sensei takes the view that in order to do this skilfully and with integrity it is necessary to develop a deep holistic understanding of the human body.

The teaching on the course was exemplary. There is a huge pool of experiential knowledge at the Shiseikan and a great sense of trust practised which creates a safe environment for exploration and research. There is also a genuine generosity and patience shown by the teachers. The teachers are encouraged under Inaba sensei's direction to develop there own teaching methods to further their own practise. I found it inspiring to experience the different, personal approaches. In particular the classes lead by Sasada Sensei, known for his sometimes bizarre teaching aids which included a biscuit tin lid and a uni-cycle! He has an ability to keep his body soft and fluid but clear, precise and incisive without any apparent extraneous tension.

Inaba sensei's method is not form lead but rather that form is to provide a framework for fundamental study of the body. My understanding is that form can also be viewed as the result of the activity and not the main objective. In order to practise Inaba sensei's method it is necessary to develop an understanding of one's own physiology and to view the body both qualitatively and energetically. This we studied through breathing exercises, various forms of meditation some of which were quite energetic, slow practise and exercises requiring muscular stamina, one being shiko. This exercise is most often associated with sumo wrestlers - tilting the body to the side over one leg, coming back to the centre through a deep squat in the legs, and then tilting to the other side. This is sometimes done repeatedly for a period of between ten and twenty minutes. These activities are seen as an intrinsic part of martial or Budo practise. They should be done with great attention to breathing and concentration and with self reflection and recognition. Through this method of practise I have had physical experiences I have not encountered through over twenty years as a professional dancer.

I have not been raised following a specific faith. However, I can only describe some of what I have felt whilst at Shiseikan as being of a spiritual nature. Inaba sensei practices Shintoism, integral to this faith is the appreciation of nature. As part of the course Inaba sensei took us out for the day into the countryside, the area we visited is called Oktama, about two hours by train from Tokyo. The weather during my stay was mostly good. However, on this day it was raining lightly. This led to there being an almost magical mist hanging over the hills which was incredibly beautiful. We first visited a small Shinto shrine nestled in the hills. And then we walked through the countryside for about half an hour to visit the house and museum of Yoshikawa Eiji (1892-1962). Yoshikawa Eiji is most famous for his writing. In particular for his book about the warrior Miyamoto Musashi who wrote *The Book of Five Rings*. This book is about the principles of samurai warfare. In the garden of the house I saw a medium sized maple tree, its roots were partly exposed, they seemed like fingers reaching with incredible energy into the ground. It looked almost as the roots were moving away from the tree's energetic desire to grow upwards. From the trunk grew branches out and away from the tree's centre, not in straight lines but as if they had, had to search out the direction it was best for them to grow. At the end of these a cascade of beautiful red and gold leaves poured as if water. In spite of all this activity the tree had a stoic sense of quiet about it.

On leaving the museum we walked along the banks of a large river swollen from the rain to a restaurant where we sampled beautifully prepared and delicious Japanese food. After our meal we continued walking until we arrived at the Gyokudo Art Museum. Outside the museum there was a traditional Japanese garden so beautiful in its simplicity each stone so thoughtfully placed in relation to another. The artist whose work we had come to see was called Kawai Gyokudo (1873-1967). He had a great love for nature and people and was apparently loved by the people in turn. The museum was small but contained a large amount of drawings, paintings and sketches by the artist. These were of the surrounding countryside, animals and people. These pictures were made with great care and attention to detail also beautiful in their simplicity. I was struck by the sense of energy in the work and how through such care and diligence so much was conveyed.

We soon reached our final destination which was a traditional Japanese onsen, a natural hot springs bath. What an enormous treat this was. Lying outside in hot water set amongst trees it is impossible to not relax and enjoy the calm. The business of Tokyo and indeed London seemed very far away. Being the only female on the course I was in a separate bath to the others, this gave me time to quietly reflect on the day's events.

During my stay in Japan I was also able to visit The National Museum, where there was an extensive exhibition of artefacts from the Tokogawa period. The Tokogawas ruled Japan from 1603 until 1868 during the Edo period prior to the Meiji period. The exhibition consisted of many extraordinary pieces which included full armour, swords, prints and Noh theatre masks. I found it particularly interesting to note the detail in the armour and I am always awed by the rather chilling beauty of Japanese swords or Shinken.

I also visited a small town about two hours from Tokyo called Kamakura. To get there it is necessary to travel part of the way by electric tram which clanks its way along the coast and then winds its way through people's back gardens! A fun experience. Kamakura is famous for its large and beautiful Buddhist temples one of which is dedicated to children. It is also famous for The Great Buddha or Daibutsu. The Daibutsu made from bronze is 13.35m tall and weighs 121 tonnes. It was cast in 1252 A.D. by the sculptors Ono-Goroemon and Tanji-Hisamoto. Originally there was a large temple housing the Buddha but in 1498 a tidal wave swept it away leaving the statue behind. So it now sits exposed to the elements and the surrounding hills. As with much of what I experienced in Japan the Daibutsu appears to be waiting or contemplating very quietly and calmly, I could also appreciate its sense of physical weight - its presence on land almost like a thumb print in a piece of wet clay.

I am still making sense of the many wonderful experiences I had. When I meet with Inaba Sensei and practitioners from the Shiseikan dojo I experience a sense of belonging, which also feels odd given that I am very much a western independent woman. It feels strange to me that I have found a connection with an oriental martial art, which in the case of the sword work we study, originates in the 13th century. I believe it is to do with the generosity of the people that I feel this but also that through Inaba Sensei's method, he is developing the core of what is human and if you are shown a way it is possible regardless of gender, race or culture to connect with that.

Apart from the inspiring classes we attended at the dojo the strongest image left with me is that of the tree in Eiji Yoshikawa's garden. The tree is doing what it needs to do to survive and is, therefore, pragmatic in its actions. All too often I find dance is about embellishment or aesthetic, the tree was beautiful without consciously trying to be. Also, we as dancers can sometimes get away with not quite fulfilling a movement or step, the tree can not do that, neither ultimately can a martial artist under threat of death. How can I understand something of the energies or forces of nature that the tree uses? Why is it necessary to think of myself as being any different? Also what relationship do I have to the walls that surround my body, can I envisage them gone like those around The Daibutsu?

Having taught in various places since returning from Japan these are some of the questions I have put to my students as well as to myself. They are challenging questions but have been met with interest. Meeting with Inaba Sensei always reminds me of the importance of consideration and quiet to enable the mind and body to be active but remain uncluttered.

On the last day of a course it is traditional to have a Sayonara party. At the end of the party when much beer and sake had been consumed Inaba Sensei asked each of the practitioners from London to say a little speech about their experience in Japan. I was reminded of the exhibition of work I saw on our trip to Oktama, by the artist Kawai Gyokudo and how each part of his drawings and paintings seemed so carefully considered, how each bird or person appeared to be in exactly the right place. Having thanked them for their kindness and generosity I said I believe that is precisely what Inaba Sensei is doing, through his teaching both in and out of the dojo he is carefully helping people to find their right place in this world, and through his guidance he not only encourages me to reflect on my own practise as a dancer and martial artist but as a person too.

I would like to thank the LUTSF for assisting my trip to Japan. It was a truly wonderful experience.

Sasha Roubicek